DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 665 FL 025 296

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TITLE Differences in N/NN Teachers' Evaluation of Japanese Students' English Speaking Ability.
PUB DATE 1992-00-00
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Research (143) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
JOURNAL CIT Cross Currents; v19 n2 p161-65 Win 1992
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Interrater Reliability; Japanese; *Language Proficiency; *Language Teachers; *Language Tests: *Native Speakers; Oral Language; Questionnaires; Second Language Instruction; Speech Skills; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS Japanese People

ABSTRACT

A survey of 32 Japanese and 44 native English-speaking teachers of English as a Second Language investigated how the two groups evaluate the English speech skills of Japanese students. A 59-item questionnaire was designed to elicit comparative information on definition of oral proficiency, criteria (including newer ones derived from instruction focusing on communicative competence) used to assess oral skills, and the relative importance attached to these criteria. Results suggest significant differences overall between Japanese and native English-speakers' standards in two main assessment categories, fluency and discourse factors, although no significant differences appeared within subcategories of these criterion groups. The questionnaire is appended. (MSE)

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ED 423 665

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Cross Currents
Vol. XIX, No. 2
Winter 1992
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INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of the notion of communicative competence, the role of oral proficiency has become more central in language teaching than it was in the era of structuralism. In response to this phenomenon, tests of speaking ability have also changed. In such tests the crucial element is the rating of students' performance. A few problems arise, however, when testing English speaking ability. First, the definition of speaking ability may not be clearly established. Second, the meaning of categories used to rate speaking ability, including newer ones derived from communicative competence, may not be understood in the same way by both Japanese English teachers and native English teachers. Third, these criteria may not be considered equally important by both groups of teachers in evaluating the English speaking ability of Japanese students.

A primary goal of foreign language teaching is to enable students to communicate with native speakers. Thus, in foreign language tests, especially speaking tests, native speaker evaluation standards are crucial when rating categories are decided. Following is a look at how Japanese English teachers and native English teachers evaluate the speaking ability of Japanese students.

HYPOTHESES

1. In some criteria there may be significant differences in the rating standards of native and Japanese English teachers.

2. When there are no significant differences between the two groups of evaluators, some criteria will be rated higher by both Japanese and native teachers while both groups of teachers will give lower points to other criteria.

SUBJECTS

Seventy-six college English teachers--32 Japanese English teachers and 44 native English teachers--were chosen as subjects. All subjects had been teaching English at the college level for at least two years.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

A 59-item questionnaire (see Appendix) was used as the research instrument. All items were rated on a 1-5 scale (1=not important, 5=important). These 59 items consisted of 11 main categories and 48 sub-categories which were selected mainly from the following four sources: informal interviews with the subjects; Richards' (1990) notion of conversation strategies; Nakamura's (1990) previous work with native speaker evaluation points; Bachman's (1990) linguistic theory of Communicative Language Ability.

To arrive at the 59 items, pilot tests were conducted with three groups: native English teachers, Japanese English teachers, and native speakers who were not teachers. This was to ensure that in the final questionnaire, all subjects would clearly understand the meaning of each item.

PROCEDURE

1. Two hundred college English teachers at four conferences were asked to answer and mail in questionnaires. A total of 76 completed questionnaires were returned.

2. The mean score and the standard deviation

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of each group (Japanese English teachers and native English teachers) were computed. T-tests were conducted to elicit any significant differences between the mean scores of both groups.

FINDINGS

Table 1:

Two main categories, *Fluency* and *Discourse factors* show significant differences in the mean scores between the two groups. The Japanese and native English teachers also differed on the order of importance of some categories (see Mean). Native English teachers ranked *Fluency* the most important, followed by *Discourse factors* and *Content*. In contrast, Japanese teachers ranked *Content* as the most important category, followed by *Pronunciation (suprasegmental)*, and *Vocabulary use*. *Fluency* was ranked as least important.

Thus, in the 11 main categories, there are differences in the order of importance of categories as well as in the differences of the mean scores between the two subject groups.

Table 1

	Mean		S.D.		t
	Japanese	Native	Japanese	Native	
1. Grammatical accuracy	3.09	3.09	.73	.80	.02
2. Vocabulary use	3.53	3.73	.80	.66	1.17
3. Pronunciation (segmental features)	3.44	3.11	.95	.95	1.47
4. Pronunciation (suprasegmental features)	3.59	3.30	.95	.82	1.46
5. Fluency	2.87	3.97	.69	.84	5.65***
6. Discourse factors (cohesion and coherence)	3.25	3.89	.72	.84	3.46***
7. Content	3.84	3.82	1.02	1.00	.11
8. Level of speaker's confidence	3.34	3.43	1.13	1.07	.35
9. Sociolinguistic competence	3.28	3.36	.85	.84	.42
10. Strategic competence	3.34	3.68	.94	.93	1.56
11. Illocutionary competence	3.19	3.43	.82	1.02	1.12

*** $p < .001$, two-tailed

N.B. Japanese Teachers (n=32); Native Teachers (n=44)

Table 2:

There are no significant differences in the *Fluency* sub-categories in Table 2, even though *Fluency*, as one of the main categories, had significant differences within the scope of the 11 main categories. Table 2 also shows that *Frequency of uncompleted sentences* and *Correct speed of speech*, generally regarded as an important factor of "fluency," are rated as less important by both groups of teachers, while *Ease of speaking* is rated as highly important by both groups.

Table 2

	Mean		S.D.		t
Fluency	Japanese	Native	Japanese	Native	
1. Proper use of pauses	3.25	3.14	.76	.88	.59
2. Frequency of uncompleted sentences	2.94	2.86	.72	1.09	.33
3. Correct speed of speech	3.03	2.98	.93	.88	.26
4. Smoothness of the expansion of the topic	3.38	3.36	.87	.99	.05
5. Ease of speaking	3.47	3.91	1.05	.96	1.90

Table 3:

None of the *Discourse factors* subcategories showed any significant differences in Table 3, although the main category *Discourse factors* showed significant differences within the framework of the 11 main categories. Table 3 does indicate that *Logical combination of sentences* and *Flow of ideas* are rather highly evaluated by the native teachers of English.

Table 3

	Mean		SD		t
Discourse factors (cohesion and coherence)	Japanese	Native	Japanese	Native	
1. Logical combination of sentences	3.72	4.05	.99	.81	1.58
2. Skills in paragraph development	3.44	3.16	1.08	1.33	.98
3. Flow of ideas	3.69	4.00	1.03	.94	1.37

Table 4:

Although there were significant differences in only two of the main categories, Table 4 shows that significant differences exist within some of the subcategories of the remaining nine main categories. Some noteworthy examples are: *Use of grammatically correct word order* is more highly evaluated by Japanese English teachers; the scores for *Proper use of articles* are very low in both groups, though there is a slight significant difference; native English teachers rate *Proper use of tone* very highly, indicating a dislike for monotonal sentences; native teachers also put more stress on *Ability to start and finish a conversation*, *Ability to repair trouble spots in conversations*, and *Ability to manage the utterance act*.

Table 4

	Mean		SD		t
	Japanese	Native	Japanese	Native	
Grammatical accuracy					
- Use of grammatically correct word order	4.00	3.52	.86	.79	2.34*
- Length of utterances	2.60	3.09	.84	.83	2.57*
- Correct use of noun-verb agreement	2.81	3.41	1.03	1.10	2.39*
- Ability to use plural forms of nouns	2.88	3.36	.98	1.04	2.08*
- Proper use of articles	2.50	2.84	.76	.99	1.63***
Pronunciation					
- Proper use of tone	3.31	3.86	.74	.96	2.73**
Level of speaker's confidence					
- Speaker's sureness of phonological accuracy	3.16	2.64	.72	.84	2.83**
Strategic competence					
- Ability to start and finish a conversation	3.41	3.98	.88	.93	2.71**
- Ability to repair trouble spots in conversation	3.41	4.11	.98	.84	3.36**
- Ability to use conversational routines	3.09	3.52	.69	.79	2.46*
Illocutionary competence					
- Ability to manage the utterance act	3.50	3.93	.92	.87	2.09*
- Ability to manage the propositional act	3.19	3.66	.64	.86	2.61*
- Ability to manage the illocutionary act	3.34	3.66	.79	.86	1.63***

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .10, two-tailed

DISCUSSION

The results presented in Table 1 support the first hypothesis that there may be significant differences between native and Japanese English rating standards in some criteria. However, none of the sub-categories of *Fluency* and *Discourse factors* showed any significant differences. This may be because the scores of *Fluency* and *Discourse factors* in Table 1 are not the summed total of individual sub-category scores of Tables 2 and 3. That is, in Table 1, the raters evaluated *Fluency* and *Discourse factors* holistically without paying special attention to the details of each category, and the scores of each category were computed and analysed within the scope of the 11 main categories. In contrast, as Tables 2 and 3 show, raters gave points to each subcategory and the scores were computed and analysed individually. Perhaps the raters' evaluation of the two categories, *Fluency* and *Discourse factors*, is different, depending on whether they are evaluating the two categories within the overall framework of the 11 main categories or from separate sub-categories of each.

Furthermore, while only two main categories out of 11 showed any significant differences, sub-categories of the remaining nine main categories did show significant differences. There may be two reasons for this discrepancy. First, as mentioned earlier, the scores of the main categories are not the summed total of the scores of the sub-categories. Second, the raters could evaluate sub-categories in detail, while they could only evaluate the main categories from the wide, overall perspective.

The results in Table 5 support the second hypothesis that when there are not significant differences between the two groups of evaluators, some criteria will be rated higher by both groups of subjects, while both groups will give lower points to other criteria.

Table 5

	Mean		SD		t
	Japanese	Native	Japanese	Native	
Items which were given lower points					
- Frequency of uncompleted sentences	2.94	2.86	.72	1.09	.33
- How the speaker produces semi-vowels	3.00	2.86	.86	1.09	.60
Items which were given higher points					
- Content	3.84	3.82	1.02	1.00	.11
- Stress	3.88	3.89	.91	.84	.06
- Rhythm	3.94	3.89	.80	.78	.28
- Intonation	3.97	3.82	.74	.82	.83

CONCLUSION

The profiles of rating standards of both Japanese English teachers and native English teachers in evaluating Japanese students' English speaking ability have been described. Partial support for the two hypotheses was also found. However, the deviation of the scores between the main and the sub-categories still exists. Therefore, in future research, the construct validity and the content validity of both main categories and sub-categories must be determined. This will be of great value for considering rating criteria for tests of English speaking ability.

Acknowledgment

This paper is based on a presentation at the 30th Annual Convention of the Japan Association of College EnglishTeachers (JACET), Hokkaido University, 1991.

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Appendix

Part I

Directions: When you evaluate Japanese students' English speaking ability in class, how much weight do you put on each category below?
Please circle one choice for each category. See the example below.

	not important				important
EXAMPLE	1	2	3	4	5
Grammatical accuracy					
Vocabulary use					
Pronunciation (segmental features)					

N.B. If you are not sure of the definition of the eleven categories below, please refer to the following pages where you can find some specific items in each category.

	not important				important
1. Grammatical accuracy	1	2	3	4	5
2. Vocabulary use					
3. Pronunciation (segmental features)					
4. Pronunciation (suprasegmental features)					
5. Fluency					
6. Discourse (cohesion & coherence factors)					
7. Content					
8. Level of speaker's confidence					
9. Sociolinguistic competence					
10. Strategic competence					
11. Illocutionary competence					

Part II

In Part II, each category of Part I will be analysed in detail. Please circle one choice for each item as in Part I.

	not important				important
Grammatical accuracy	1	2	3	4	5
12. Use of grammatically correct word order					
13. Level of sentence complexity					
14. Length of utterances					
15. Correct use of noun-verb agreement					
16. Correct use of tense/aspect form					
17. Ability to use plural forms of nouns					
18. Proper use of articles					
19. Proper use of personal pronouns					
20. Proper use of prepositions					
21. Use of complete sentences					
Vocabulary use					
22. Recognition of nuances					
23. Variety of words					
24. Choice of idioms					
Pronunciation (segmental features)					
25. How the speaker produces vowels					
26. How the speaker produces consonants					
27. How the speaker produces semivowels					
28. How the speaker produces diphthongs					
29. How the speaker produces clusters of sounds					
Pronunciation (suprasegmental features)	1	2	3	4	5
30. The naturalness of stress					
31. The naturalness of the intonation					
32. The naturalness of the rhythm					
33. The level of the tone					
34. Proper use of tone (i.e., not monotonic pronunciation)					
Fluency					
35. Proper use of pauses					
36. Frequency of uncompleted sentences					
37. Correct speed of speech					
38. Smoothness of the expansion of the topic					
39. Ease of speaking					
Discourse (cohesion & coherence factors)					
40. Logical combination of sentences					
41. Skills in paragraph development					
42. Flow of ideas					
Content					
43. The creativity or the imaginativeness of the speech					
Level of speaker's confidence					
44. Speaker's certainty of the grammatical accuracy					
45. Speaker's sureness of the phonological accuracy					
46. Speaker's confidence in the choice of words					
Sociolinguistic competence (difference in register or difference in variation in language use)					
47. Ability to handle the field of discourse (the appropriate language use in the language context)					
48. Ability to handle the mode of discourse (the ability to attest to the differences between written and spoken variation in language use)					
49. Ability to handle the tenor of discourse (the use of appropriate style among the participants in certain language use contexts)					
Strategic competence (in the case of interview or role-play)					
50. Ability to manage turn-taking (taking a turn, holding a turn and relinquishing a turn)					
51. Ability to start and finish a conversation					
52. Ability to initiate and respond to remarks on a broad range of topics					
53. Ability to develop and continue speaking on topics					
54. Ability to repair trouble spots in conversation (communication breakdown or comprehension problems)					
55. Ability to use conversational fillers and small talk					
56. Ability to use conversational routines					
Illocutionary competence (in the case of interview or role-play)					
57. Ability to manage the utterance act (the utterance act: the act of saying something					
58. Ability to manage the propositional act (a propositional act: referring to something, or expressing a predication about something)					
59. Ability to manage the illocutionary act [the illocutionary act: the function (e.g., assertion, warning, request) performed in saying something]					

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Subcription Information

English Today, Volume 8 (ET 29–32); January, April, July and October in 1992: £41 for institutions; £19 for individuals; £16 for students and the retired.

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